



They wove through the forest for half an hour before they came out on to a road heading north. It was thin and winding, flanked either side by trees arching above their heads. Their branches sparkled with frost.

'If I wasn't so sure that they'd shoot me if they caught me,' said Ilya, 'this would be very beautiful.' His tone was unnaturally bright.

Feo was about to tell him to keep his voice down, but as she turned she caught sight of his face. It was bluish, except his eyes, which were rimmed with the pink of sleeplessness. Already his lips were chapping in the wind, but he hadn't once complained. She forced a wide smile. 'Don't worry. We'll shoot them first.'

'We don't have a gun.'

'You know, meta- ... metaphorically. *Metaphorically*, we'll shoot them first.'

'I think I'd prefer to shoot people literally if I'm going to shoot them at all.'

Feo made a face at him and checked the compass balanced on Black's head. 'Keep an ear out for carts.'

The road was deserted, but Feo guided Black close to the verge so they could leap into the ditch if they heard anything coming. The going was much faster here on the road – though the

snow came halfway up the wolves' legs – because there were no stones or fallen logs to navigate.

The wolves had been running fast for more than an hour when Feo first heard the noise. 'What's that?'

'The wind?'

Feo looked up at the branches overhead. 'They're not moving.'

The noise came again. Feo let out a hiss of fear, and she bit a chunk of hair to keep her teeth from rattling together: because it was the sound a horse makes when it is anxious. Nobody she knew could afford a horse. Nobody except the Imperial Army.

She looked back, but the road twisted out of view.

'I think he's somewhere near,' she whispered.

Black growled. Perhaps her knees had contracted too tightly and she'd hurt him, or perhaps he'd smelt something.

Ilya was chewing on his glove, his eyes wide. 'Where?'

'I think behind us,' she said. 'We need to get off the road.' She slid off Black's back. 'Into the woods – we'll have to jump the ditch. Come on.'

But wolves do not obey orders unless it suits them. Before Feo could catch her, White turned and ran back along the road the way they'd come.

'No! Come back!' shouted Ilya.

Feo didn't bother to shout. She slipped the pup into her pack, lifted her cloak in both hands and ran. As she rounded the bend in the road, Ilya came alongside, wheezing hard. 'Run ... slower,' he gasped.

Black and Grey followed, running on each side of Feo, their ribcages bumping against her knees.

As she turned the corner Feo halted. Terror swept through her and she stepped back, trying to push the two wolves out of sight behind her. Her arms closed more tightly around the pup, wriggling in his sack.

Standing in the middle of the road was a sled carved with the Imperial crest. It shone with fresh gold paint and, set under the blue frost-clad trees, it was as if the world had been dipped in fairytale colours. A horse, harnessed in silver and leather, was frantically pawing at the snow, barely held steady by a soldier. The horse's eyes were fixed on White, who stood, growling, her hackles pointing to the sky.

And in the back of the sled, wrapped in blankets, sat General Rakov.

‘Wild?’ he was saying. ‘Or one of hers?’

Then he looked up and saw her; and Feo saw his face.

The skin on one side was puckered, swollen yellow and purple and green. A bandage was wrapped over one eye, and he wore a fur hat low over his forehead. His expression, as he recognised Feo, was one of raw surprise. But as she watched she saw the twist of triumph in the old man’s lips.

‘The little wolf girl,’ he said. ‘I had forgotten you were so small.’

And he pulled a pistol from his belt, saluted Feo and shot White in the side.

Feo screamed and Ilya dropped to the ground as White stumbled, rolling backwards in the snow. But before Feo could move, the wolf was scrabbling to her feet and staggering through the ditch and into the woods, a trail of red behind her.

Panic gave wings to Feo's feet. She bolted, dropping straight into the ditch. The snow closed up to her neck and she gasped, scrambling for footholds, crawling up the other side and into the woods. She heard Ilya panting behind her, calling her name; she reached back a hand without looking, seized him and dragged him further into the woods, beating back low snowy branches with her free fist. Black blurred past her, following White's bloody trail, but Grey followed more slowly, walking backwards, her gums and teeth bared to whatever might be following.

Once only, Feo turned: just in time to see Rakov mounted bareback on the black horse, urging it into the ditch. Its hooves scrambled for purchase to mount the bank, and the younger soldier pushed its rump, forcing the horse

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up and into the wood. Rakov barked an order, and two more shots rang out.

Terror made the world turn broken and disjointed, and Feo saw only the trees ahead of her. She retched. Snow grabbed at her boots, and she concentrated only on running, dragging Ilya by the wrist, dodging around great white humps of bushes and beating the snowy world out of her way. Ilya was saying something – shouting something – but the bellow of terror in her ears blocked out all sound and logic, and all she could do was run.

It was the sight of White, as they caught up with her, that brought Feo to her senses. The wolf was staggering now, her hind feet dragging, and as Feo reached her, White's legs gave way. Blood had stained her fur pure satin red. Feo had not known, until then, that wolves can moan like humans.

Feo took White's head in her arms and eased her on to her side. Black ran on, then stopped too, looking back like an anxious father. Feo shook her head at him. She hunkered down in the snow, and spat, and dug her fists into the stitch at her side. Ilya hovered uneasily, his eyes staring.

'Have we lost him?'

Feo looked back at Grey. Her hackles stood up stiff as an iron railing. 'No,' she said. 'Grey can smell him.' She heaved a breath. 'This can't be happening.'

'But it *is* happening. So what do we do?'

The 'we' was generous, Feo thought. It was her, after all, whom Rakov was seeking, her face which had made his eyes light up with such a metallic shine of pleasure.

'White can't run much further.'

Ilya said, 'Can one wolf ride another wolf? Could we put White on Black's back?'

You could not, it turned out, make one wolf ride another. Ilya and Feo together tried to heave White to lie crosswise over Black's back: it was the nearest White had ever come to hurting Feo. She snarled and lashed out with her claws, clacking her jaws, and twisted back on to the ground. Black merely looked pained.

Ilya's eyes were wide. 'That's a firm negative, I think.' He looked behind them, but the trees were too thick to see anything. 'Feo, is he going to kill us?'

'We won't let him,' said Feo. She tried to sound strong and calm, like Mama. She tried to suppress the roar of urgency in her blood, to make a plan. 'But if White can't run, we'll have to go where

they can't follow us. Rakov will be slow on foot, won't he?'

'Well, he's old. I've never seen him run, if that's what you mean.'

'In that case, we'll go where a horse can't.'

Feo stared around them. The trees looked down at her, calm and waiting. They gave her hope; it was like having an army of her own. This was her terrain, she thought. This was the land she knew.

'There,' said Feo. 'That way: there's fir trees. They grow close.'

She helped White to her feet and they went on, the two children and the three wolves, barely at a jog now, stopping and listening every few steps, navigating into the heart of the wood. Feo kept her hand on White's shoulder, feeling the exhaustion in every step.

The neighing did not begin again until they were into the roughest and oldest part of the forest, where storms had knocked trees down years before and no woodsman had ventured deep enough to claim them for firewood. One giant oak sagged drunkenly against the other trees, its roots upended. The tree was leafless, but from it grew a curtain of icicles, some as thick as Feo's arm. As they ducked under it an icicle fell, smashing on the ground, sending Black darting sideways and snuffing angrily. It gave Feo the first nudge of an idea.

'I want to do something here. Will you take the wolves on?'

'No! Your mother would kill me if I left you alone! I'm older than you, remember?'

'Please, I need you to drag the wolves: look, here, by the scruff of their necks. They won't go without being forced.'

I don't want them here.' The wolves turned to her voice as she spoke. Their eyes were full, as they always had been, of fire and nerves and faith in her. 'I won't let him hurt them.'

'They're *wolves*.' He looked at her as if she'd suggested something unreasonable. 'Won't they eat me if I try to drag them?'

'I don't think they will. They know you well enough now. Probably.'

Ilya licked his lips. 'Probably.'

'Please, *quickly*. And the pup too. Here, he's in my sack. There's a hole in that bramble bush – there, at the bottom. If you take them through that, you'll be hard to follow.'

He stared from Feo to the bramble bush, which rose leafless, eight feet tall, sprawling between the trees. 'That's a mouse hole.'

‘No, it’s a fox path. It’ll be wider than it looks if you beat the snow away, I swear.’

She did not wait to watch them go, but began digging under the snow for stones. It wasn’t easy, and her gloves were soon soaked, but she found four good-sized rocks. She dropped them into her hood. Then she ran to a fir tree and heaved herself into its branches, kicking against the trunk for purchase and moving as slowly as she dared, so that the snow would help to block her from view.

This, at least, was familiar: the wood under her hands and feet, the widening view, the scent of ice and pine. She could see bushes shake as Ilya led the wolves in an unsteady parade through the undergrowth – and, in the opposite direction, the movement of branches.

The horse came into sight as if on to a stage. Rakov’s face was set, with traces

of sweat at his neck and lip. He guided the horse straight for the curtain of icicles.

Feo said a prayer to the saints of good aim and wild ideas. She hurled her stone, not at the horse, but at the oak tree. The first went wide, landing soundlessly in the snow, but the second hit an icicle at its root. It dropped. Rakov reined in his horse and looked up, frowning. She threw another stone, and then another, breathing hard and leaning out from the tree with one arm wrapped around the branch, her aim growing sharper with each throw. There was a sudden clattering, glittering cacophony as thirty icicles came loose, showering down on Rakov's fists and lap and horse.





The horse shrieked, a scream of bewildered terror at this sudden torrent of frozen glass. It reared, beating its hooves against the cascade, and Rakov let out a single angry hiss. He grabbed at the horse's mane, but it reared again and

he slipped sideways with a great shout and fell. The horse bolted, its mane patterned with broken ice.

Feo did not wait to see if Rakov was moving. She dropped six feet into the snow, rolled, spat out sludge and what felt like a bit of her own tooth, and ran for the hole in the bramble. She wriggled through on her stomach, scratching her hands, and then straightened up. A grin had taken over her face, despite the fear still in the air. Adrenalin kept all pain at bay and she let out gasps of relief as she sprinted down the trail the wolves' feet had left, brushing aside branches, looking neither back nor to the sides, but only at the path laid out for her.

Grey saw her before she saw Grey. The wolf gave a rumble of recognition, and Feo cannoned straight into her, sliding sideways, and fell down flat on her back.

Four faces loomed over hers. The hairless one smiled.

‘Did it work?’

Feo sat up. ‘Better than I expected.’

‘Is he still coming?’

‘I think so. But not yet.’ She rested her hand on White’s nose and counted her breaths. They were shallow, but steady. ‘I think she can carry on. We’ll have to be slower, though.’ She swung her leg over Black’s back. ‘I’ll tell you about it later. We’d better keep going.’

‘Towards St Petersburg!’ Ilya looked as relieved as Feo felt. ‘You’ll love it, Feo.’ He handed her the pup, who wriggled in her arms before settling down to sit on top of Black’s head. ‘It’s a beautiful city.’ Then, suddenly urgent: ‘Are you all right?’

‘Of course!’ she said. Or that was what she said inside, but to her astonishment

she found herself suddenly shivering too hard to shape the words.

'You've gone green. I think you're in shock. Here!' He fished a handful of candied fruit from the pocket in his trousers. 'Eat this.'

'I'm fine, really,' she muttered. Her teeth were vibrating. She glared at her jaw as best she could. 'Tell me about St Petersburg. I need to know what it's like.' The fruit was dusty and covered in trouser fluff, but sweet. The pulsing in her head eased.

'Well ... it's huge. And golden. It's a very tall city: it's full of spires.' Ilya mounted Grey and tucked up his feet. 'And there's a town square as big as a lake.'

Black followed. Feo let herself relax into the rhythm of his tread. She reached out and laid one hand on White's back, pulling her close, and the

three wolves walked abreast, a wall of fur and teeth and loyalty.

‘And the horses wear plumes, like ballerinas. And there are theatres that look like palaces, with ballets every night.’

‘We don’t have ballet out here. Is it ... it’s not a kind of food, is it? That’s something else.’

‘It’s *dancing!* It’s magical, actually. A kind of slowish magic. Like writing with your feet.’

‘Have you seen it?’

He grinned, but didn’t answer. ‘And the city’s got people selling black bread and honey on the streets, freshly toasted. It’s *exquisite.*’

‘Good,’ said Feo. She didn’t know what an exquisite might be, but it sounded promising. ‘Onwards, then.’

They set off, slower now, dripping blood behind them, but pointing always towards the north.